



Characterising strategic collaboration of large Swiss municipalities

Lukas Baschung & Jérôme Heim

To cite this article: Lukas Baschung & Jérôme Heim (2022): Characterising strategic collaboration of large Swiss municipalities, Local Government Studies, DOI: [10.1080/03003930.2022.2039635](https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2022.2039635)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2022.2039635>




© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.




Published online: 22 Feb 2022.



[Submit your article to this journal](#) 



[View related articles](#) 



[View Crossmark data](#) 

Characterising strategic collaboration of large Swiss municipalities

Lukas Baschung  and Jérôme Heim

Haute école de gestion Arc, University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland/HES-SO, Neuchâtel, Switzerland



ABSTRACT

By analysing legislative programmes of all Swiss municipalities having more than 20,000 inhabitants (in 2018) and in two different time periods (2010 and 2020), this study examines the general place of collaboration in municipal strategies, by paying attention to the various public fields and degree of complexity in terms of actor constellations. As in real life, collaboration occupies also an important part of the large Swiss municipal governments' strategic reflections. Yet, a certain gap exists regarding the weight given to public fields. Indeed, politically selling fields seem to get more place in legislative programmes than in real life. Collaboration, such as planned in municipal strategies, involves a large diversity of actors and thereby achieves a certain complexity which clearly goes beyond the intermunicipal level. The degree of complexity does not evolve over time but inhabitants become a strategically more important collaborative actor for municipalities.

KEYWORDS Collaboration; cooperation; strategy; complexity; Switzerland

Introduction

During the last three decades, European public administration has been undergoing far-reaching reforms, whose common goal consists in making public administration more performant. The most prominent reform, called 'New Public Management (NPM)', has spread all over the world – though in various forms (Hood 1995) – including Switzerland (Giauque and Emery 2008). Reforms of the Swiss public sector left deep footprints, also at the municipal level. New Public Management (NPM) penetrated since the 1990s, especially in larger municipalities (Ladner 2016). Between 2000 and 2010, 94% of all Swiss municipalities introduced some NPM instruments (Keuffer 2018). One visible NPM footprint consists of the elaboration of municipal strategies, mostly called 'legislative programmes'. This public document contains strategic objectives, decided by the municipal government, for the next legislative, a four- or five-year period.

CONTACT Lukas Baschung  Lukas.Baschung@he-arc.ch  Haute école de gestion Arc, University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland/HES-SO, Neuchâtel, Switzerland

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

However, NPM was not the only public sector reform narrative, that was observed empirically in the Swiss public sector. 'Network Governance', a reform narrative, which emphasises among others the collaborative¹ aspect of public management (Ferlie, Musselin, and Andresani 2008), also shows up prominently at the municipal level. Intermunicipal collaboration largely diffused (Steiner and Kaiser 2013) and intensified especially between 2005 and 2010 (Keuffer 2018). Yet, municipal collaboration is not limited to collaboration with other municipalities. In the case of Swiss agglomerations, collaboration at the horizontal level also takes place with actors of the civil society and private actors. In addition, vertical collaborative networks, composed of actors of the municipal, cantonal (state) and federal levels are also observed (Kübler 2014).

The present study simultaneously focuses on those two phenomena – municipal strategies and collaboration – since it is interested in the use of collaboration as a tool to achieve strategic goals. By analysing legislative programmes of larger Swiss municipalities, which are defined here as having more than 20,000 inhabitants (in 2018), and in two different time periods (2010 and 2020), this study examines the following three questions and, thereby, contributes to the debate on strategic collaboration of municipalities. First, what is the general place of cooperation in municipal strategies and how does it develop over time? On the basis of a survey of Swiss municipalities, Steiner and Kaiser (2018) report that intermunicipal cooperation is very important. Thus, this first research question aims at examining whether the strong place of municipal cooperation also appears at the strategic level. This distinction is important because collaborations mentioned in strategic documents are not necessarily always implemented in reality, but can be seen as a means to express politico-strategic intentions for the future. Second, intermunicipal cooperation seems to be stronger in certain public fields than in others (Steiner and Kaiser 2018; Kübler 2014; Steiner 2003). This study examines whether differences in terms of public fields, such as observed in previous studies, also apply to mentions in strategic documents or whether the focus is put on other public fields. Again, it will also be examined whether the focus on certain public fields evolves over time. Third, although some studies also consider cooperation with other types of actors than municipalities (Hulst and van Montfort 2007; Hulst et al. 2009), more research is required regarding cooperating actors, especially concerning residents (Swianiewicz and Teles 2018). The composition of cooperative networks has an impact in terms of management complexity (Camões, Tavares, and Teles 2021). Therefore, their analysis in terms of composition and over time will allow observing with which degree of complexity cooperation is planned within strategic documents and whether complexity is increasing or not.

On the basis of these three kinds of observations and, previously, a presentation of the state of the art of strategy and collaboration at the municipal level, hypotheses related to the Swiss context as well as methodological considerations, a general discussion of the place of collaboration in public strategies is carried out in order to nourish the debate on municipal strategic collaboration also of other countries, especially federal ones.

Strategy and collaboration in the public sector and at the municipal level

Strategic management

Ferlie and Parrado (2018) describe the use of strategic management in the public sector of the UK, Spain and Germany and thereby observe the influence of different schools of strategic management. Unsurprisingly, the influence of the 'Porterian school' with its top-down and strategic positioning approach can be particularly well observed in the European NPM orientated outlier UK. However, the degree of NPM implementation does not fully explain empirical observations. The background of the managers may also have an influence. For instance, hospitals led by 'professionals' (i.e., physicians) tend to adopt a rather interactive process of strategic management, in line with the 'Mintzberg school', whereas hospitals led by 'administrative' managers underline efficiency gains in their strategic management, in line with the 'design school'. In addition, organisational variables, such as degree of publicness, observability of outputs and outcomes and the degree of autonomy (strategic space) also influence the use of strategic management by public agencies. Finally, at least in the case of Germany, enthusiasm for the use of strategic management seems to be bigger at the local level than at the federal level (Ferlie and Parrado 2018).

According to Weiß (2019), data about the diffusion and intensity of strategic management at the municipal level only exists to a limited extent. Studies carried out on data as off the 1970s indicate that between 40% and 60% of American municipalities have a strategic plan (Poister and Streib 1994; Jimenez 2014). Smaller cities tend to introduce less often strategic management than larger ones (Kwon, Berry, and Soun Jang 2014). The share of German municipalities that implemented strategic management achieves not more than 15% (Weiss 2017). Weiß (2019) summarises a number of reasons, which prevent municipalities from using strategic plans in a strong form: the number of stakeholders who have to be integrated in strategy formulation, heterogeneous constellations of interest, blame avoidance, professional values of managers going against managerial concepts, small size and heterogeneous tasks.

Studies on the impact of strategic management on the municipalities' performance generally show that if there is an impact, it is only slightly positive (Weiß 2019). Evidence from a practice-based case study, focusing on a Swiss municipality (Sauter et al. 2019), seems to indicate that municipal strategies may increase effectiveness and efficiency if they are coupled with adapted Information and Communication Technologies, which provide precise, indicator based information about strategic advancement.

Collaboration: a promising tool for public sector management

NPM was criticised, among others, for being focalised too much on the management of public administration as such, neglecting its political and societal context and especially the fact that various actors situated outside of public administration also intervene on public management (Kickert 1997). In this context, various authors mention other, more collaborative forms of management, such as 'Network Governance' (Ferlie, Musselin, and Andresani 2008), which are practised in real life of public administration. This alternative public management narrative considers the relevance of an increasing number of actors (both public and private), the limited role of the State, the distribution of power on inferior and superior institutional levels, lateral rather than vertical management, the self-organising capacity of networks as well as the exchange of good practice (Ferlie, Musselin, and Andresani 2008).

Several authors underline the advantages of collaborative management (CM) for public administration. First, CM represents a mean to survive or to achieve interesting goals for public institutions who do not possess enough own resources (Klijn 2005). Second, the output of public policies can be improved thanks to CM (Torfing 2019). Third, by integrating various actors in the elaboration and implementation of public policies, the latter's legitimacy can be increased. Fourth, CM helps to solve problems that go beyond geographic borders, institutional levels and political fields (Scott and Thomas 2017). Furthermore, Agranoff and McGuire (2001) argue that knowledge development and learning occur best in networks, whereas Torfing (2019) reports about CM's positive impact on innovation in public policies. Thus, CM seems to offer many ways to improve the overall performance of public management.

Steiner and Kaiser (2018) confirm such advantages also in the context of Swiss municipalities. They highlight the potential for economies of scale, higher quality and professionalism, the introduction of new services and infrastructure and the lessening of the free rider problem. Simultaneously, some disadvantages and risks are also mentioned. Intermunicipal cooperation may slow down the decision-making process, cause democratic deficits, provoke a loss of municipal autonomy and hinder the development of an overall strategy (Steiner and Kaiser 2018).

Municipal collaboration

Advantages, disadvantages, motivations as well as conditions for ‘successful’ cooperation of municipalities are also popular topics of the relevant international scientific literature. The largest part of studies on municipal collaboration focuses on intermunicipal collaboration and analyses the municipalities’ motivation to collaborate. A classical motivation, especially for smaller municipalities, seems to consist of potential cost reduction, as demonstrated in the Spanish case (Bel, Fageda, and Mur 2013). If this finding is confirmed by data on Norway, geographical location and heterogeneity relative to neighbouring municipalities also seem to influence intermunicipal cooperation (Arntsen, Torjesen, and Karlsen 2018). Another study demonstrates that cost savings are at the centre of interest in short term cooperation, whereas service quality and cross-jurisdictional coordination determines long term cooperation between municipalities of the New York State (Aldag and Warner 2018). In addition, effective cost reduction seems to depend on internal factors of intermunicipal cooperation, such as the institutional arrangement of municipal cooperation, the participation of municipal representatives in management and professional managers (Soukopová and Vaceková 2018).

Concerning the composition of cooperative groups, Hulst and van Montfort (2007) notice in their comparative study of eight European countries that there is a strong presence of pure intermunicipal cooperation and, to a lesser extent, also some mixed forms of cooperation with other public or even private entities. Although horizontal cooperation is dominating, popularity of vertical cooperation between municipalities and upper level government is increasing. Besides access to financial resources and know-how, shared competencies in certain public fields and the need for larger scales explain this evolution (Hulst et al. 2009). In their study of American cities’ collaboration in the field of economic development policies, Agranoff and McGuire (Agranoff and McGuire 2004) consider the whole range of horizontal and vertical dimensions. Among others, they explain the large variety in collaborative activity found by the strategic orientation of each city.

The composition of the cooperation network also determines management complexity. In the case of intermunicipal cooperation in Portugal, Camões, Tavares, and Teles (2021, 1) conclude that ‘a larger number of local governments involved in IMA [intermunicipal associations] and higher levels of heterogeneity among them make cooperation more difficult’. It is argued that the challenge is even bigger in the case of municipal cooperation, which involves non-governmental actors and governmental actors of higher levels.

Finally, although cooperation and strategy are related, no study analysed the place of cooperation within municipal strategies, to our knowledge.

Swiss context and hypotheses

The context of Swiss municipalities situates them in a situation, within which they need and are able to cooperate. They need to cooperate because they are part of the Swiss federalist and therefore multilevel system, where many tasks are shared between two or even three institutional levels (Ladner and Desfontaine Mathys 2019). Collaboration with private actors is a traditionally widespread practice in Switzerland, since many public tasks are shared or even delegated to non-governmental actors. With NPM reforms, this tendency was reinforced (Ladner 2013). However, Swiss municipalities are also able to cooperate since they dispose of a particularly high autonomy. Indeed, in European comparison, they benefit of the highest autonomy (Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim 2016), what facilitates reforms aiming at improving service delivery in accordance with local preferences (Keuffer 2018). Thus, if they consider that cooperation may be a useful tool, they have the liberty to use it.

What hypotheses can be made regarding the research questions? Intermunicipal cooperation is very important in Swiss municipalities (Steiner 2003; Steiner and Kaiser 2018). Kübler (2014) notices that as good as all nuclear towns are involved in one or several kinds of collaborations. Municipalities of agglomerations principally collaborate in order to achieve economies of scale and to improve coordination (Kübler 2014). As a consequence, *we expect that such collaborations also figure in municipal strategies (hypothesis 1a)*. Concerning the potential evolution over time, three arguments lead to the *hypothesis of a slight decrease in the number of collaborations (hypothesis 1b)*. First, mergers undergone by scrutinised municipalities may have an impact on the number of collaborations, since mergers may constitute a mean to overcome institutional fragmentation. Between 2010 and 2020, three out of the 34 scrutinised municipalities were concerned by a merger.² Thus, a slight reduction of collaborations can be expected due to mergers. Second, in the case of institutional fragmentation, cooperation projects mentioned in municipalities' strategies may necessitate long term cooperation, whereas other cooperative projects, such as the realisation of common planning of new infrastructure, may be resolved after a few years of cooperation. From this point of view, it can be expected that some short-term projects, planned in municipal strategies of 2010, are finished until 2020 and will not reappear in the 2020 strategies. Of course, new short-term collaborative projects may emerge. Third, municipal cooperation intensified between 2005 and 2010 (Keuffer 2018) and also between 2012 and 2017, but more in small than in medium-sized and large municipalities (Steiner and Kaiser 2018). Since this study focuses on larger municipalities, a further intensification is not expected.

Regarding the prioritisation for collaboration in specific public fields, Kübler (2014) observes that intermunicipal collaboration is particularly strong in culture, provision of water, gas and electricity, evacuation of used water and waste,

welfare, security, justice and traffic. These findings coincide for the most part with an earlier study of Steiner (2003). In addition to the mentioned fields, the latter study also identified school issues and healthcare as public fields with a high degree of intermunicipal cooperation. Since strategies often aim at change related to the changing environment, *we hypothesise that cooperation such as suggested in municipal strategies may concern other public fields than the ones where effective cooperation is reported by previous studies of Kübler (2014) and Steiner (2003) (hypothesis 2a)*. In the same vein, we expect that different public fields may be strategically prioritised in 2020 than in 2010 (*hypothesis 2b*).

Finally, with regard to the complexity of collaboration, it is worth underlining that 'municipal tasks have become more complex and manifold due to societal, technological and economic changes and increasing requirements from citizens' (Steiner and Kaiser 2018, 174). From this point of view, one can argue that an increasing number of non-governmental actors must be integrated in problem solving. Simultaneously, it has to be underlined that legislative programmes have a more or less strong performative character, as demonstrated by Wyden Guelpa and Genoud (2015) for the case of the Swiss cantonal (state) governments. As a consequence, governments may be judged on the basis of their degree of performance at the end of a legislative period and before the next elections and therefore may adopt the strategy of 'blame avoidance' (Hood 2011). In this double context, *we make the hypothesis that municipal cooperation, such as planned in legislative programmes, involves other municipalities and public authorities situated at the upper government levels (governmental actors) than actors of the civil society and private actors (non-governmental actors) (hypothesis 3a)*. In addition, *it is hypothesised that horizontal collaboration is more frequent than vertical collaboration (hypothesis 3b) and that the share of collaborations with only one type of actor is more frequent than with two or more types of actors (hypothesis 3c)*. Since, complexity seems to increase over time, *we hypothesise that complexity in terms of types of collaborative actors (governmental vs. non-governmental), institutional level (horizontal vs. vertical) and number of involved types of collaborative actors slightly increases between 2010 and 2020 (hypothesis 3d)*. In other words, it is expected that the share of planned collaborations with non-governmental actors, of vertical collaboration and with two or more types of actors increases.

Methods and data

The study's analytical basis consists of the legislative programmes of all Swiss municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants in 2018 (n = 45), the year of which most recent data was available at the time of the

research project's formulation. Focusing on the largest municipalities increased the chance to find legislative programmes, since they implemented more strongly NPM instruments than smaller ones (Ladner 2016). Smaller municipalities using less systematically strategies, an analysis of this group would have been less representative. In addition, given the very important number of small municipalities in Switzerland, the difficulty of empirical feasibility would be very high. As the legislative period has different durations (four or five years) and years of departure according to the municipality, the periodicity is not identical either. Therefore, legislative programmes, covering the year 2020, were collected. Most of them were available on the municipalities' websites. The introduction date of such strategic programmes also varied. Some pioneers introduced them in the end of the 1990s, others waited until a few years ago or do still not use this instrument at all. Therefore, municipalities were contacted in order to receive legislative programmes covering also the year 2010, what allowed comparison over time. In the case of eleven municipalities, such a comparison was not possible since legislative programmes did not exist either in 2010 and/or 2020 or because contacted municipalities did not react to our request. As a consequence, the study is based on 34 municipalities.

The identification of cooperation was carried out through detailed reading of all 68 legislative programmes. Any paragraph containing a mention of cooperation was selected and integrated in a data base. In addition, not only explicit mentions of the word 'cooperation' or 'collaboration' were identified but also paragraphs, which clearly speak about cooperation, without mentioning the given words as such. Paragraphs with too vague terms, such as 'sustain' or 'help' were excluded. Whenever several text passages obviously focused on the same issue, they were merged to one single observation, in order not to overvalue them. All observed items were integrated in a excel data base.

Once the data base constituted, each observation was analysed regarding its content. The observations were qualified regarding the concerned public field(s), collaborative actor(s) and the institutional level of the collaborative actor(s).

The typology of public fields is principally based on a list of Steiner and Kaiser (2013), which contains nine public fields within which municipalities generally have to accomplish tasks. Indeed, depending on cantonal legislation, municipalities' tasks vary to some extent. All of the nine public activities fields except one (municipalities' internal organisation) were taken as a basis to attribute the empirical observations. Four of them were enlarged through related topics (see words in italics). Five more categories were added in order to cover empirical observations (see categories in italics), which can mainly be explained by the fact that municipalities also execute voluntary tasks in other public fields. As a result, the following categories of public fields are used for the analysis:

- (1) Provision of water and electricity & evacuation of used water and waste;
- (2) Construction, *urbanism & big projects*;
- (3) Public transport & roads;
- (4) *Environment*;
- (5) Citizenship & *integration*;
- (6) Police & *security*;
- (7) Health and Social welfare;
- (8) *Sports, culture and leisure*;
- (9) *Economic development*;
- (10) Education;
- (11) Finance;
- (12) *Transversal*³;
- (13) *Undefined*.⁴

The types of collaborative actors were partly predefined (e.g., municipality, canton, federal government, private enterprises, inhabitants, associations and other organisations of the civil society), partly chosen in an inductive way, i.e., on the basis of empirical observations (foreign actors, higher education institutions, internal services [such as local public enterprises, schools and other rather autonomous public organisations at the local level]). Considering that collaboration is more complex with a different kind of actor than with municipalities, collaborations are distinguished between those, which are planned with other municipalities and those, which are planned with a different kind of actor than municipalities (e.g., canton, private enterprise, etc.).

Regarding the institutional level of the collaborative actor, it is observed whether the collaboration takes place on a horizontal and/or vertical dimension. Collaboration with other municipalities, private enterprises present within the municipalities, inhabitants, associations and other organisations of the civil society is considered as horizontal collaboration. Collaboration with cantons, the federal government and public enterprises of cantonal and federal levels is considered as vertical.⁵

The volume of analysed legislative programmes varies a lot between municipalities. Some of them are defined on two pages, whereas others are developed in extensive reports of almost one hundred pages. This may have an impact on the number of observations per municipality. As a consequence, the longitudinal comparison of the number of cooperation observations is not done for all municipalities together, but by municipality. Thus, it is analysed how many municipalities increased or decreased planned strategic cooperation between both periods. This reduces the bias introduced by the varying format between the municipalities' legislative programmes, since the format generally remained

the same between 2010 and 2020 within the same municipality. In addition, regarding the further research questions, other peculiarities in terms of empirical observations are also being controlled for municipalities with a particularly high number of observations, due to their documents' volume. Finally, this heterogeneous format also implies that accessible information, for instance in terms of actors involved in cooperation, is not always uniform either. As a consequence, some observations cannot be qualified regarding the type of collaborative actors, public field or institutional level. Last but not least, it is important to underline that by counting the different observations of collaborations, no difference is made regarding their respective scope, e.g., in terms of financial importance or duration.

Table 1. Evolution of cooperation observations between 2010 and 2020 by municipality.

Municipality	Year 2010	Year 2020	Evolution factor*
Aarau	6	8	1.33
Allschwil	10	3	0.3
Basel	12	12	1
Bern	4	4	1
Biel/Bienne	10	4	0.4
Carouge	6	4	0.67
Dietikon	2	2	1
Dübendorf	4	0	0
Emmen	9	3	0.33
Frauenfeld	9	3	0.33
Fribourg	6	17	2.83
Genève	2	9	4.5
Horgen	2	2	1
Köniz	6	2	0.33
Kreuzlingen	8	3	0.375
Kriens	9	2	0.22
La Chaux-de-Fonds	25	14	0.56
Lancy	2	5	2.5
Lausanne	16	34	2.125
Luzern	6	6	1
Montreux	3	9	3
Neuchâtel	51	25	0.49
Nyon	10	0	0
Renens	11	19	1.73
Rapperswil-Jona	4	5	1.25
Schaffhausen	9	2	0.22
St.Gallen	2	3	1.5
Uster	5	5	1
Wettingen	3	1	0.33
Wil	6	6	1
Winterthur	9	1	0.11
Yverdon-les-Bains	6	7	1.167
Zug	3	1	0.33
Zürich	12	5	0.4167
Total	290	226	0.78

* = 2020/2010

Empirical findings

Slightly decreasing importance of collaboration as a strategic tool

Cooperation seems to be popular among Swiss municipalities, also at a strategic level. In the case of 66 out of 68 scrutinised municipal strategies, at least one, but mostly several cooperation observations were made (see [Table 1](#)). Thus, hypothesis 1a can be confirmed. Simultaneously, there is no unanimous tendency towards more or less strategic cooperation between 2010 and 2020. Almost half of municipalities reduced the number of planned collaborations (among which two municipalities reduced them up to 50%, thirteen between 51–100% and two with more than 100%), the other half is divided in ten municipalities, which increased the number of collaborations (among which four up to 50%, one between 51–100% and five with more than 100%), and seven municipalities, whose number remained stable. Thus, the hypothesis 1b of a slight reduction of planned collaborations can be confirmed. However, interestingly the three municipalities concerned by a merger between 2010 and 2020 – i.e., Horgen, Wil and Yverdon-les-Bains – either remained stable or even slightly increased the number of collaborations over time. Thus, the reason for this overall reduction is not merger.

Varying collaboration by public field

The hypothesis with regard to collaboration by public field (hypothesis 2a) seems to be confirmed. Some public fields with frequent cooperation are also popular within the legislative programmes. Culture, together with sports and leisure, is also the most popular field of collaboration in municipal strategies. Health, together with social welfare, is also a frequently mentioned field for cooperation. Simultaneously, there are also some public fields which are more prominent in strategic documents than in reports of effective cooperation. ‘Construction, urbanism and big projects’ as well as ‘economic development’ are two fields, which are clearly more often mentioned in strategies than provision of water and energy and evacuation of water and waste as well as ‘public transport and roads’ (traffic) (see [Figure 1](#)). It is also worth mentioning that a considerable part of collaborations (10–13%) are announced without mention of any public field. Thus, it is rather the principal of collaboration than a concrete project, which is mentioned. Interestingly, this ranking by public field remains very similar over time, although certain fields’ relative weight slightly increases or decreases. Thus, the hypothesis according to which strategic preferences with regard to cooperation vary over time cannot be confirmed (hypothesis 2b). In other words, strategy in terms of cooperation is not necessarily adapted to changes in the environment. This raises

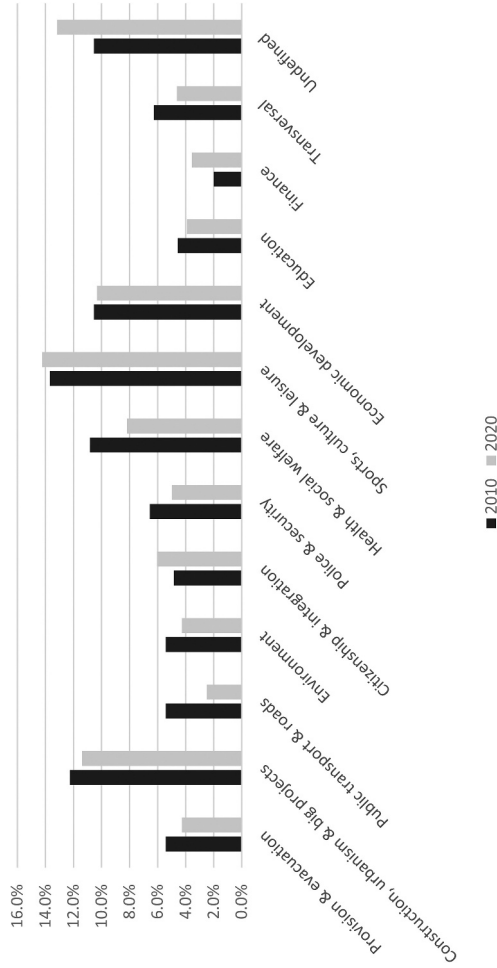


Figure 1. Planned collaborations by public field.

again the question whether differences in terms of public fields between effective cooperation and planned strategic cooperation differs for other reasons than the changing environment.

From external to internal collaboration

Within analysed strategic documents, other municipalities (between 25% and 30%) and the cantons (15–18%) are the most frequent collaborative partners, yet they do not occupy a majority of all observations. Thus, the hypothesis 3a must be rejected. Indeed, the large diversity of collaborative actors and their relative importance has to be underlined (see [Figure 2](#)). After other municipalities and cantons, associations and other civil society actors are the municipalities' third collaboration partners (14–15%), followed by private enterprises (12–14%). Other private actors, higher education institutions, internal services, foreign actors and inhabitants complete the rich range of collaborative actors, though their relative weight is less important. Regarding the evolution of the non-governmental actors' importance, the hypothesis 3d can be confirmed to the extent that other municipalities and cantons loose importance between 2010 and 2020. However, instead of a generally increased importance for non-governmental actors, one only actor strongly increases its importance as a collaborative partner between 2010 and 2020, i.e., inhabitants (from 4 to 12%)! Only ten municipalities planned collaborations with inhabitants in 2010, whereas they were 16 in 2020, which shows that this change is not only based on some individual municipalities. Thus, social complexity seems to increasingly concern also the internal dimension of municipalities and not only the external dimension.

Given this striking evolution between 2010 and 2020, it is worth examining within which public fields collaboration with inhabitants is planned in 2020. Unsurprisingly, an important share concerns citizenship and integration, since inhabitants are very directly concerned. Yet, it is striking that again one public field holds by far the largest share, i.e., 'construction, urbanism and big projects (see [Figure 3](#)).

A preference for horizontal collaboration

Regarding the institutional level of the cooperative actors, it is considered that horizontal collaboration is the least complex form of collaboration, since it is mono-dimensional and, a priori, without any perceived hierarchical order between actors. Vertical collaboration seems more complex to us since, legally speaking, there is a certain hierarchical order, which may prevent municipalities from looking for more contacts with cantons than necessary. The most complex form consists of bi-dimensional collaboration, involving collaborative partners from the horizontal and vertical level. About three

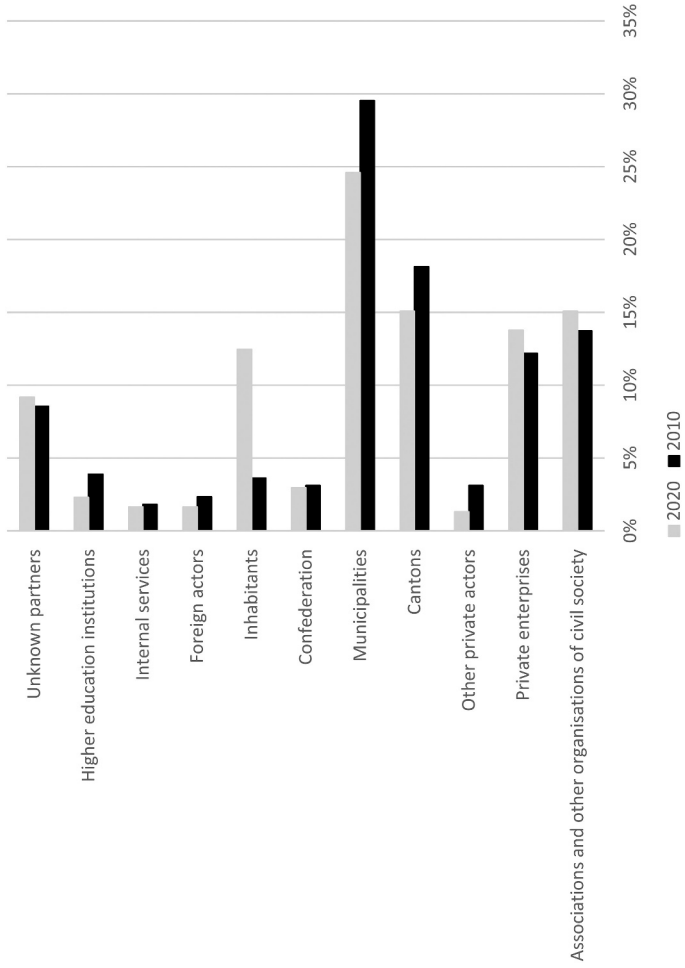


Figure 2. Planned collaborations per type of actor.

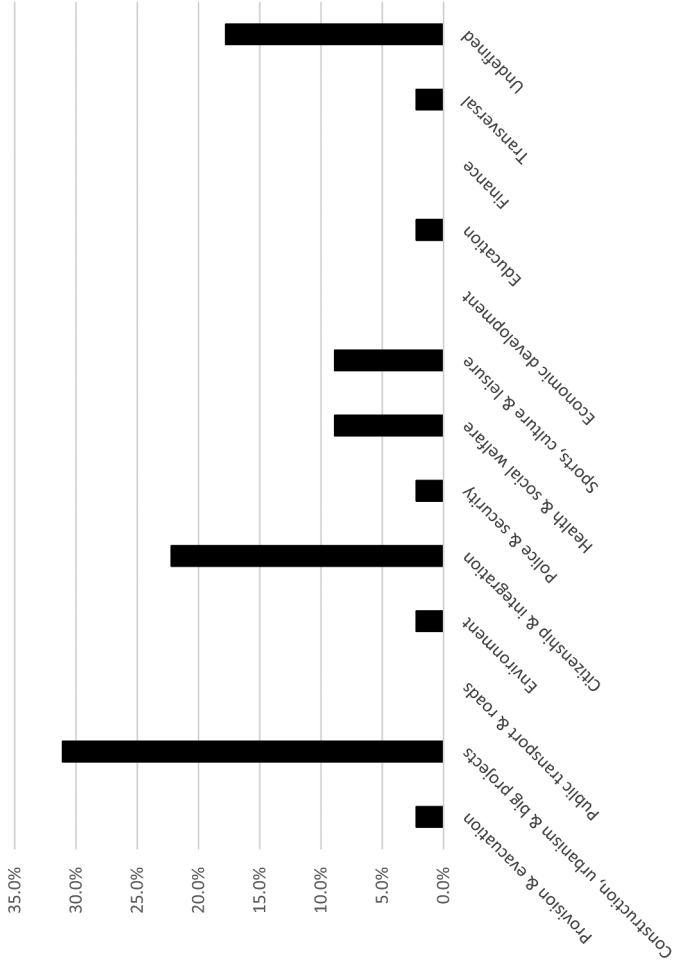


Figure 3. Planned collaborations with inhabitants by public field in 2020.

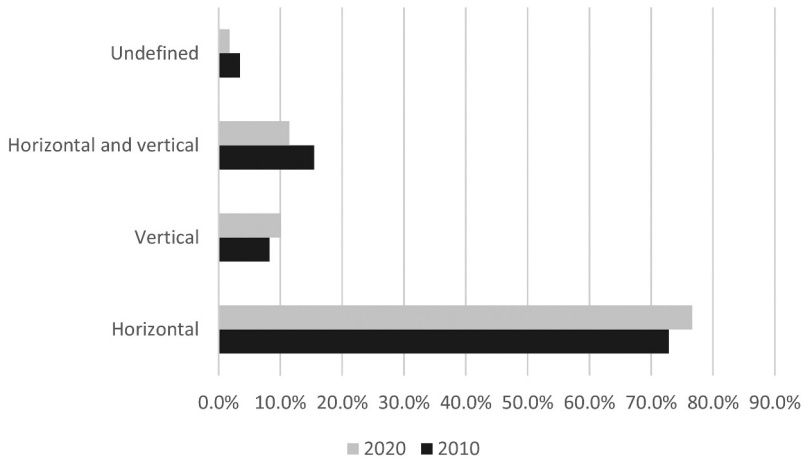


Figure 4. Planned collaborations by institutional levels.

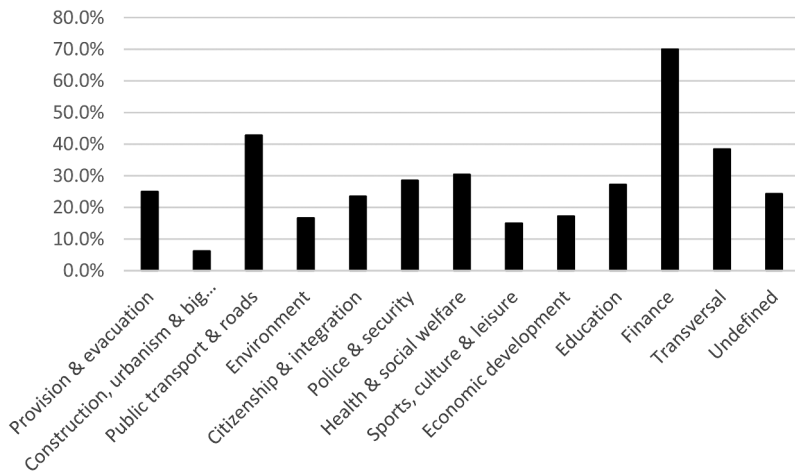


Figure 5. Share of planned vertical collaborations by field in 2020.

quarters of all observed collaboration items take place on the horizontal level. Thus, the hypothesis 3b can be confirmed. Interestingly, collaborations which involve the horizontal and vertical levels are even slightly more frequent than ‘pure’ vertical collaborations, although we expect the former to be more complex than the latter. Since observed results remain quite stable over time, the hypothesis 3d cannot be confirmed regarding increasing complexity in terms of involved levels (see [Figure 4](#)).

Since vertical collaboration seems to be less popular than horizontal collaboration, it is interesting to see within which public fields, vertical collaboration is dominant (more than 50%). An analysis of the number of

vertical and horizontal/vertical collaborations by field on the total number of collaborations by field in 2020 shows that vertical collaboration is only dominant in the field of finance (7/10 observations) (see [Figure 5](#)). Although the analysed texts do not always provide information about the objective related to collaboration, the observations related to the field 'finance' often contain a lobbying goal. Thus, in this case, collaboration aims at convincing cantonal and federal authorities to improve the municipalities' financial situation.

Keeping collaboration as simple as possible

Coming back to the complexity issue, it is also argued that the more types of various actors are involved in collaboration, the more complex collaboration becomes. Therefore, observed items were also analysed regarding this issue. Indeed, almost 70% of observed items take place with one only type of actor (see [Figure 6](#)). Thus, the hypothesis 3c can be confirmed. In most cases, the collaborative actor is not another municipality, but a different kind of actor. This tendency even reinforced between 2010 and 2020 (from 41% to 46% out of the 70%). Almost a quarter of all collaborations take place with two types of actors. Also in this constellation, the two collaborative actors are mostly other actors than a municipality. The share of collaborations with three or more types of actors is inferior to 10%. These results show that a certain complexity seems to be necessary to achieve some strategic goals. Simultaneously, municipalities do not want to complicate collaborations more than necessary in terms of numbers of involved types of actors. Again, this situation remains quite stable over time. Thus, the complexification hypothesis (3d) must also be rejected on the basis of this kind of measurement.

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that municipalities seem not to fear collaboration with other kinds of actors than municipalities, since between 62% (in 2010) and 67% (in 2020) of all collaborations exclusively take place with non-municipal actors. This finding also clearly demonstrates that municipal collaboration is a phenomenon, which can definitely not be limited to the intermunicipal collaboration.

It is difficult to evaluate on the basis of the analysed documents, whether collaborations with several other types of actors take place within own single network or rather bilaterally between the municipality and each collaborative actor. Nevertheless, one may ask whether there are public fields, whose strategic objectives necessitate more complex actor constellations than others in order to be achieved. An analysis of all observations including two or more types of collaborative actors (including the category '1 + other municipalities') was carried out by calculating the respective shares of such networks by public field. It shows that complex actor constellations are most frequent in 'Health and social welfare', 'Economic development' and 'Sports, culture and leisure'

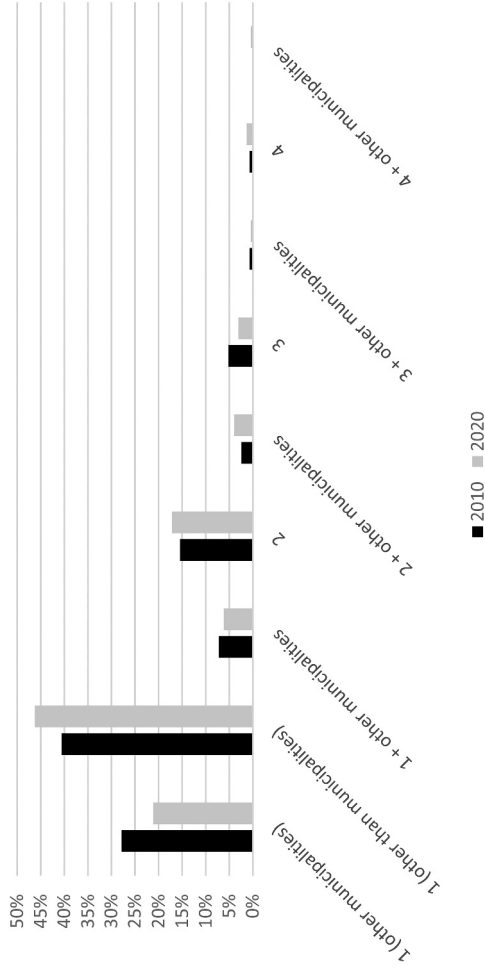


Figure 6. Number of types of actors involved in planned collaboration.

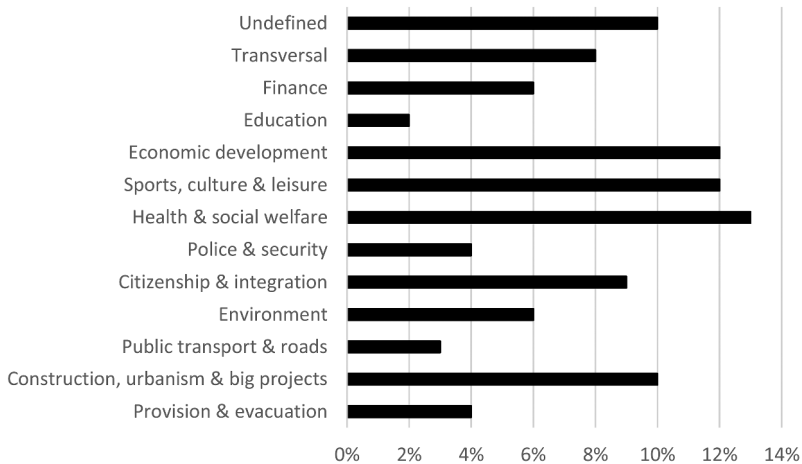


Figure 7. Planned collaborations with 2 and more types of actors by public field in 2020.

(see Figure 7). If one deduces ‘undefined’ and ‘transversal’ items, these three fields occupy almost half of all complex observations. In terms of frequency, they are followed by ‘Construction, urbanism and big projects’ as well as ‘Citizenship and integration’. Such networks actor constellations are clearly rarer in the remaining fields.

Discussion and conclusion

On the basis of the study’s results, it can be said doubtlessly that collaboration is a tool, which is not only an important part of the Swiss municipal governments’ daily life, but also of their strategic reflections. Given the institutional conditions, i.e., a multilevel system, high municipal autonomy and traditionally strong collaboration with private actors, this finding is not surprising. As hypothesised, the number of planned collaborations is slightly decreasing over time, yet, not because of municipal mergers. Thus, there must be other reasons. After a period of increasing numbers of collaborations, it may be natural that the instrument of cooperation cannot be exploited even more in the case of larger municipalities. Thus, it may have reached its limits. Indeed, a balance has to be found between the advantages – such as economies of scale, higher quality and new services – and disadvantages of cooperation – such as time-consuming decision-making processes, potential democratic deficits and the loss of municipal autonomy. Simultaneously, empirical observations have still to confirm whether this slight decline also takes place in reality and not only in strategic reflections.

Obtained results raise further questions. First, how can the observed patterns in terms of planned collaborations by field be explained? It is striking that the relative weight of public fields partly differs between effectively reported cooperation by field and declared strategic intentions and that this difference is quite stable over time. Thus, explaining this difference by the evolving context would probably be wrong since it did not evolve significantly between 2010 and 2020. Rather, it seems that local governments consider that collaborations in the field of 'construction, urbanism and big projects' as well as 'economic development' generally sell better than cooperative projects relative to the provision of water and energy and evacuation of water and waste. Indeed, the former fields allow developing more easily a promising vision for the future evolution of a municipality than less spectacular fields, such as evacuation of water and waste. Thus, this might be a reason why they receive more place in such public strategic documents than the place they occupy in municipalities' daily life.

Second, this study allowed identifying patterns in terms of actor constellations and degree of complexity. Apparently, local governments plan cooperation as complex as necessary and as simple as possible. Collaboration is essentially planned at the horizontal level. Simultaneously, more than 30% of all collaborative observations involve two or more types of actors. In addition, about two thirds of all collaborations are carried out with other types of actors than municipalities, what demonstrates that municipal collaboration clearly goes beyond the intermunicipal level and attains a certain complexity. As a consequence, the question may be raised whether this finding corresponds to a Swiss particularity or a broader tendency. A comparison with other countries would provide more insight.

Besides these scientific findings, this study allowed identifying further findings, which are relevant from a political point of view. First, as mentioned, collaboration seems to be seen, above all, as a strategic tool among local actors. It is mostly planned at the horizontal level and within public fields, which are prominent local issues, such as 'construction, urbanism and big projects', 'sports, culture and leisure' as well as 'economic development'. It is far less present in more national or even global issues, such as 'environment'. As a consequence, one may ask whether the relatively weak share of planned vertical collaboration expresses a decoupling effect between municipalities and their cantons and the Confederation, as a reaction to the deterioration of cantonal and federal financial support. Indeed, municipalities complain about the increasing delegation of federal and cantonal tasks to them without the relative funding and horizontal collaboration with other municipalities and private actors is seen as a mean to remedy to this situation (Giauque and Emery 2008). This interpretation somehow contradicts with findings made by Ladner and Desfontaine Mathys (2019),

according to which 65% of all municipalities – yet with important differences according to the canton – consider that their relationship with their canton is good or rather good. Another explanation could be that municipal government programmes are naturally more strongly orientated towards local collaboration, since citizens who elect governmental members are principally interested in local issues. Whatever the empirically correct answer, it is certainly worth thinking about more strategic policy coordination among actors situated at the various institutional levels, because there are many fields, which concern the three levels. An important path was made in 2001 with the foundation of the ‘Tripartite Conference of the Agglomerations’, transformed in 2017 to the ‘Tripartite Conference’ (Ladner and Desfontaine Mathys 2019). The latter includes representatives of the Confederation, cantons, municipalities, agglomerations and – since 2017 – rural areas and is a platform that treats ‘territorial questions’ (Ladner and Desfontaine Mathys 2019). Potential for increasing strategic collaboration seems to exist, for instance in the field of environment, where vertical collaboration is weak and, in addition, does only weakly take place at the horizontal level.

Second, the evolution of strategic collaboration between 2010 and 2020 in terms of collaborative actors clearly shows that the importance of collaboration with inhabitants strongly increased. Due to direct democracy, Swiss citizens are used to be asked to co-decide about important political decisions. From this point of view, the fact that municipalities plan to collaborate with them is not astonishing. Yet, what may be the reason that municipalities consider them much more strongly in 2020 than in 2010? It is striking that municipal collaboration with inhabitants is especially planned for the public field ‘construction, urbanism and big projects’. Indeed, between 2010 and 2020, several big municipal projects – such as the 92 metres high ‘Taoua Tower’ in Lausanne – were refused due to opposition of citizens. Citizens seem to feel increasingly concerned, a tendency which was already identified for other European countries (Loeffler and Bovaird 2018) and cities increasingly use participative processes (Biau, Fenker, and Macaire 2013). By integrating inhabitants, municipalities try to increase legitimacy of their public policies (Scott and Thomas 2017) and thereby to reduce the risk of failure of big projects (Babey and Giauque 2009).

Finally, some shortcomings of this study must also be underlined. First of all, the study is limited to municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants and for whom data was available. As a consequence, only 34 out of more than 2000 Swiss municipalities constitute the basis of this work. An increasing number of smaller municipalities also use strategies as a management tool. Thus, later studies may also integrate them. Second, the various forms and volumes of the analysed legislative programmes necessarily limit the latter’s comparability. As no

uniform reports exist, the absolute numbers of observations per municipality should not be overinterpreted. Nevertheless, the relative weight of the total observations per public field, type and number of collaborative actors and institutional levels as well as over time provide a number of interesting patterns discussed earlier. Third, it is important to underline that analysed observations of collaborations are not necessarily implemented in reality. As mentioned, they are governmental intentions to collaborate. Thus, it would be interesting to follow up to what extent the intentions contained in the legislative programmes were or are going to be transformed in effective collaborations in order to examine how big the gap between effective and strategically planned collaborations is.

Notes

1. Since the terms ‘collaboration’ and ‘cooperation’ are often used in an interchangeable way in analysed empirical documents, this is also done in this article.
2. Analysis carried out on the basis of data provided by the Federal Office of Statistics; https://www.atlas.bfs.admin.ch/maps/13/de/15079_7981_228_227/23828.html; accessed in May 2021.
3. Observed items were qualified as « transversal” when it was obvious that they were not related to one or several particular fields, but potentially concern all fields. For instance, this is the case in cooperation projects examining the potential of a municipal merger or agglomeration projects.
4. Observed items were qualified as « undefined” when no public field was indicated and no transversal intention was visible.
5. In the case of the city of Basel, which is also a canton, collaborations with other cantons are considered as being horizontal collaborations.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Haute école Arc “Bootstrap grant”. Many thanks for this generous support.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Haute école Arc [101737].

Notes on contributors

Lukas Baschung, PhD, is an associate professor at Haute école de gestion Arc, University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland/HES-SO, in Neuchâtel (Switzerland). His research interests focus on public management practices, such as collaboration and quality management, at the local and regional level and within higher education. Simultaneously, he is interested in public policies concerning higher education and economic development.

Jérôme Heim, PhD, is a scientific associate at Haute école de gestion Arc, University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland/HES-SO, in Neuchâtel (Switzerland). After a thesis in sociology about informal work, his fields of research focus on cultural policies and participatory processes involving inhabitants and non-profit organisations.

ORCID

Lukas Baschung  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0250-3747>

References

- Agranoff, R., and M. McGuire. 2001. "Big Questions in Public Network Management Research." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 11 (3): 295–326. doi:10.1093/oxfordjournals.jpart.a003504.
- Agranoff, R., and M. McGuire. 2004. *Collaborative Public Management: New Strategies for Local Governments*. Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press.
- Aldag, A. M., and M. Warner. 2018. "Cooperation, Not Cost Savings: Explaining Duration of Shared Service Agreements." *Local Government Studies* 44 (3): 350–370. doi:10.1080/03003930.2017.1411810.
- Arntsen, B., D. Olaf Torjesen, and T.-I. Karlsen. 2018. "Drivers and Barriers of Inter-municipal Cooperation in Health Services—the Norwegian Case." *Local Government Studies* 44 (3): 371–390. doi:10.1080/03003930.2018.1427071.
- Babey, N., and D. Giauque. 2009. *Management urbain. Essai sur le mimétisme et la différenciation*. Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Bel, G., X. Fageda, and M. Mur. 2013. "Why Do Municipalities Cooperate to Provide Local Public Services? an Empirical Analysis." *Local Government Studies* 39 (3): 435–454. doi:10.1080/03003930.2013.781024.
- Biau, V., M. Fenker, and E. Macaire. 2013. *L'implication des habitants dans la fabrication de la ville: Métiers et pratiques en question*. Paris: Editions de la Villette.
- Camões, P. J., A. Tavares, and F. Teles. 2021. "Assessing the Intensity of Cooperation: A Study of Joint Delegation of Municipal Functions to Inter-municipal Associations." *Local Government Studies* 47(4): 1–23.
- Ferlie, E., C. Musselin, and G. Andresani. 2008. "The Steering of Higher Education Systems: A Public Management Perspective." *Higher Education* 56 (3): 325. doi:10.1007/s10734-008-9125-5.
- Ferlie, E., and S. Parrado. 2018. "Strategic Management in Public Services Organizations: Developing a European Perspective." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Public Administration and Management in Europe*, edited by E. Ongaro, and S. van Thiel, 101–119, London: Springer.

- Giauque, D., and Y. Emery. 2008. *Repenser la gestion publique: bilan et perspectives en Suisse*. Vol. 51: Collection le savoir suisse.
- Hood, C. 1995. "The "New Public Management" in the 1980s: Variations on a Theme." *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 20 (2–3): 93–109. doi:10.1016/0361-3682(93)E0001-W.
- Hood, C. 2011. *The Blame Game: Spin, Bureaucracy, and Self-Preservation in Government*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hulst, R., and A. van Montfort. 2007. "Comparative Analysis and Conclusions." In *Inter-municipal Cooperation in Europe*, edited by R. Hulst, and A. van Montfort, 211–238, Dordrecht: Springer.
- Hulst, R., A. Van Montfort, A. Haveri, J. Airaksinen, and J. Kelly. 2009. "Institutional Shifts in Inter-municipal Service Delivery." *Public Organization Review* 9 (3): 263–285. doi:10.1007/s11115-009-0085-8.
- Jimenez, B. S. 2014. "City Government: Strategic Management and Fiscal Health." In *Developments in Strategic and Public Management*, edited by P. Joyce, J. M. Bryson, and M. Holzer, 179–195, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Keuffer, N. 2018. "Does Local Autonomy Facilitate Local Government Reform Initiatives? Evidence from Switzerland." *International Journal of Public Sector Management* 31 (4): 426–447. doi:10.1108/IJPSM-01-2017-0016.
- Kickert, W. J. M. 1997. *Public Management and Administrative Reform in Western Europe*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Pub.
- Klijn, E.-H. 2005. "Networks and Inter-organizational Management." In *The Oxford Handbook of Public Management*, edited by E. Ferlie, L. E. Lynn Jr., and C. Pollitt.
- Kübler, D. 2014. "Agglomerationen." In *Handbuch der Schweizer Politik*, edited by P. Knoepfel, Y. Papadopoulos, P. Sciarini, A. Vatter, and S. Häusermann. Zürich: Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung.
- Kwon, M., F. S. Berry, and H. Soun Jang. 2014. "To Use or Not to Use Strategic Planning: Factors City Leaders Consider to Make This Choice." In *Developments in Strategic and Public Management*, edited by P. Joyce, J. M. Bryson, and M. Holzer, 163–178, Springer.
- Ladner, A. 2013. "Etat, système politique et accomplissement des tâches." In *Manuel d'administration publique suisse*, edited by A. Ladner, J.-L. Chappelet, Y. Emery, P. Knoepfel, L. Mader, N. Soguel, and F. Varone, 7–30, PPUR.
- Ladner, A. 2016. "Administrative Reforms in Swiss Municipalities over the Last Twenty Years-The End of New Public Management?" *Lex Localis-Journal of Local Self-government* 14 (2): 185–207. doi:10.4335/14.2.185-207(2016).
- Ladner, A., and L. Desfontaine Mathys. 2019. *Le fédéralisme suisse: L'organisation territoriale et l'accomplissement des prestations étatiques en Suisse*. Lausanne: PPUR.
- Ladner, A., N. Keuffer, and H. Baldersheim. 2016. "Measuring Local Autonomy in 39 Countries (1990–2014)." *Regional & Federal Studies* 26 (3): 321–357. doi:10.1080/13597566.2016.1214911.
- Loeffler, E., and T. Bovaird. 2018. "From Participation to Co-production: Widening and Deepening the Contributions of Citizens to Public Services and Outcomes." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Public Administration and Management in Europe*, edited by E. Ongaro and S. van Thiel, 403–423, Springer.
- Poister, T. H., and G. Streib. 1994. "Municipal Management Tools from 1976 to 1993: An Overview and Update." *Public Productivity & Management Review* 18 (2): 115–125. doi:10.2307/3380641.

- Sauter, U., T. Peter, M. Bruno Keller, M. Pfahrer, and C. Schaller. 2019. "Strategische Steuerung in der Gemeinde Wohlten bei Bern (Schweiz)." In *Strategisches Management und wirkungsorientierte Steuerung in Kommunen*, edited by J. Weiss, 119–135, Springer.
- Scott, T. A., and C. W. Thomas. 2017. "Unpacking the Collaborative Toolbox: Why and When Do Public Managers Choose Collaborative Governance Strategies?" *Policy Studies Journal* 45 (1): 191–214. doi:[10.1111/psj.12162](https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12162).
- Soukopová, J., and G. Vaceková. 2018. "Internal Factors of Intermunicipal Cooperation: What Matters Most and Why?" *Local Government Studies* 44 (1): 105–126. doi:[10.1080/03003930.2017.1395739](https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2017.1395739).
- Steiner, R. 2003. "The Causes, Spread and Effects of Intermunicipal Cooperation and Municipal Mergers in Switzerland." *Public Management Review* 5 (4): 551–571. doi:[10.1080/1471903032000178581](https://doi.org/10.1080/1471903032000178581).
- Steiner, R., and C. Kaiser. 2013. "Administration communale." In *Handbuch der öffentlichen Verwaltung in der Schweiz*. Zürich: NZZ libro, edited by A. Ladner, J.-L. Chappelet, Y. Emery, P. Knoepfel, L. Mader, N. Soguel, and F. Varone, 143–160. Lausanne: PPU.
- Steiner, R., and C. Kaiser. 2018. "Inter-municipal Cooperation in Switzerland." In *Inter-Municipal Cooperation in Europe*, edited by F. Teles, and P. Swianiewicz, 173–187, Cham: Springer.
- Swianiewicz, P., and F. Teles. 2018. "Inter-municipal Cooperation in Europe: Introduction to the Symposium." *International Review of Administrative Sciences*.
- Torfing, J. 2019. "Collaborative Innovation in the Public Sector: The Argument." *Public Management Review* 21 (1): 1–11. doi:[10.1080/14719037.2018.1430248](https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2018.1430248).
- Weiss, J. 2017. "Trust as a Key for Strategic Management? the Relevance of Council–administration Relations for NPM-related Reforms in German Local Governments." *Public Management Review* 19 (10): 1399–1414. doi:[10.1080/14719037.2016.1266023](https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2016.1266023).
- Weiß, J. 2019. *Strategisches Management und wirkungsorientierte Steuerung in Kommunen*. Springer.
- Wyden Guelpa, A., and C. Genoud. 2015. "Les programmes de législature des cantons suisses: Entre pilotage et communication." *Jahrbuch der Schweizerischen Verwaltungswissenschaften* 6 (1).